

A Distilled Opposition

MFA Thesis Exhibition 2016

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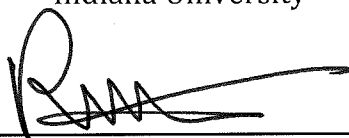
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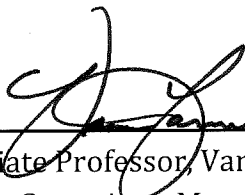
A Distilled Opposition

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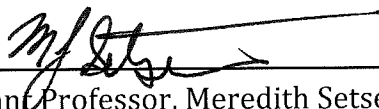
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We build our own realities. We construct meaning through our personal, social, and cultural experiences. It is our nature to unconsciously create an underlying structure as a guideline to revolve around in our lives. This structure isn't always enough. It would supply support until limitations occur from the changes evolving in every aspect. When we feel the constriction from these limitations, we react and search for solutions. Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction Theory suggests that transforming the so-called structure as a solution begins in dissecting meaning. "Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present" (Derrida 26). Derrida argues that in Western thought, the idea of defining meaning is based on the concept of a center, a presence, or a fixed point. He points out that a consequential meaning is never present, but rather is revealed from the contrast of its binary opposite, such as reality/illusion, masculine/feminine, good/bad, etc. By decentering the meaning, deconstruction subverts and shifts from central to marginal and aims to reveal the original meanings instead of being in opposition. It creates new terms; it does not intend to synthesize the concepts in opposition, but to understand their difference and their eternal interaction.

My work is the manifestation of the attempt to unravel the imbalance of reality by adapting the methodology of deconstruction. As an approach to better understand co-existing oppositions, my process engages in a series of quests that reflect the struggle inherent to the complexity of life. At this point, the re-contextualization of my thoughts and life philosophy takes the form of objects that resemble abstract

paintings. My current series of work in this thesis exhibition is an installation “*A Distilled Opposition*”, which consists of various individual and stacked pieces on both a wall and pedestals. The new emerged work has transformed into a new composition both formally and conceptually. By casting stretched canvases into resin, these box-like pieces appear to become tangible and defined in three-dimensionality. They give the concrete presence of material and resemble sculpture.



Installation “*A distilled opposition*”, 2016

The conventional rectangle symbolizes the significance of the window in painting, allowing the perspectives to extend beyond the real world. Cohesively, the presence of the object invites visual and tactile connections that signify actuality, and gives sense to the power of the realness. The work contains both illusion and physical

reality. The idea of the coexistence of the oppositions is based on my working process of imitating and reflecting the reality I experience: shifting from Eastern culture to Western culture, from majority to minority, and from central to marginal. As I act in the process of making art, I uncover my perceptions of reality by observing my action and response in this multilayered process. This reality-projecting interspace, both tangible and psychological, is where I try to understand the structure that I build. I deconstruct, push boundaries and take risks with the attempt to reappropriate meaning. I reexamine and reinvestigate my dealings toward this world we live in, to help further navigate the path I take to go forward.

### **Deconstruction and Taoism**

I was born and raised in Taiwan, so the influence of Taoism is rooted in my way of life. The teaching of Tao by Lao-Tzu is based upon a detailed understanding of underlying physical and psychological theories and principles. Taoists emphasize living in balance and harmony in the direction of being calm and detached, and they practice natural non-intervention and uncontrived actions towards the events in everyday life. When I came to the United States for college, I was immediately attracted to the culture of individualism, activism, and the drive to achieve success. But as I became influenced by the idea of fulfilling desires, I also felt deeply conflicted and could not help to question the different social values that brought thoughts of what we should achieve, why we wanted to better ourselves, or what it meant to have purpose. The Taoist's passive way may not seem relevant to the

contemporary world today, and a new interpretation for the way of life has become the new structure I search for.

“Deconstruction fits comfortably in the philosophy of the East and the wisdom of Lao-Tzu. Both deconstruction and Taoism reject any philosophical system that accommodates Western metaphysics and the notion of a transcendent and personal being... the deconstructionists claim that there is nothing permanent in the empirical self” (Thompson 26). Derrida’s theory emphasizes that language does not refer to any presence and Lao-Tzu says that reality is “nameless, indescribable, beyond telling; and therefore anything said about it is faulty . . . it cannot be defined by word or idea” (Lao Tzu 29). Both deconstruction and Taoism agree on looking at the world without involving any idea of a center, a personal God, or the rules of logic, and they regard the concept of binary oppositions in an analogous manner. Deconstruction notes that one of the oppositional terms is always privileged, controlling and dominating the other. For example, activeness is better than passiveness, and presence is better than absence. Derrida questions the dominance of the privileged term by reversing the hierarchy. To deconstruct the binary oppositions does not only mean to reverse them, the task is to dismantle the original structures that are at work within the terms. The entire structure of binary oppositions becomes unstable and unravels, and then they could be redefined in another way. The opposition may be displaced into a different context to challenge the function of the opposition itself, and this ideology is central to the way I approach creating works. Taoists believe that every

phenomenon in the universe coexists with a dynamic balance of the opposite forms. Ying and Yang symbolizes male and female, day and night, active and passive, growth and decay, birth and death, etc. It is true that all things find an opposition, but they also supplement each other. The form of opposition circulated repeatedly as changing is the permanent law of nature that's never changed. All things grow and flourish and then return to the source as we observe that the flowers and leaves originate from roots then return to roots, the clouds consist of water then eventually return to water. Thus, maintaining a balance of Ying and Yang becomes an ultimate life lesson in searching for a harmonious body, mind, and soul.

Ying and Yang represent the ideal of binary oppositions. Deconstruction provides an approach to understand binary oppositions in a contemporary interpretation. It has been what my experiences reflect, in life and in the art making process. In my practice, I count on this philosophy to keep an open mind and be acceptive as I take this journey of maintaining a balanced state of mind.

### **The process**

Our visual reality appears to us in various complexities in lines, colors and forms whether we recognize or identify the familiar. I gravitate to engage with the medium that I personally find to be most direct and responsive – paint, to explore the endless possibilities of compositions. It enables me to create spontaneously. Abstraction is a process from which artists express emotions and create forms. The idea of pure abstraction perfectly fulfilled the spirit of the Taoist idea that I

inherited from my upbringing: action through non-action, and letting the nature of the material take its own course. Using the recreating and de-constructing method to continue the developments of the composition has become the therapeutic methodology for me. Through this process I practice dealing with sentiments such as absorbing and expressing, provoking and letting go. I perceive my own inner qualities through a different dimension and learn to accept and embrace them.

The definition of “process” is a series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end, and when the actions or steps develop their own meanings, time frames are created. Any action or step formed before the present moment becomes history. In my work, I emphasize the creations of layers in order to accumulate, disclose and conceal history. These layers happen according to the time frames that indicate labor, struggles, problem solving and decision-making. This working process is not formed by conscious intention; it is a result of self-observation and the accumulation of art-making experiences. Most of the components in the finished works come from the unintentional paths in the progress, and the unexpected chemistry effects from interactions of the materials usually become the indicators to lead me to the unknown destinations.

I have always looked at myself as a painter. The intention is to reflect the reality where my experiences, thoughts, memories, and inner emotions are translated into visual forms. I build layer upon layer on canvas with various media including acrylic, oil paint, enamel paint, charcoal, graphite, wax pencil, oil stick, etc. The

compositions always start with the automatic drawing technique to produce color blocks, color fields and various shapes and lines. Color has been a key ingredient in my process in order to compose images to communicate emotions and connect the spectators in the visual aspect. The intentional placement of variations of colors, hues and tones are also used to manipulate the eyes to present depths, spaces, and multiple dimensions. The happenings and accidents within the interactions of the media is the realization of the Taoist thinking of action with non-action. The element of “unplanned” or “unpredictable” is essential to catalyze the creating steps following. Each layer occupies a certain time frame in the process, which consists of two contrasting courses of events: Intensive action that focuses on engaging the composition and the static observation that examines the interaction between the visual and the mind. The problematic matters are always encountered in both compositional and psychological realms. They contribute to an important factor in my process: struggle as a method. The struggle involves many aspects. Formally, there is the compositional struggle that relates to colors and forms. With different materials, there is development of the structural or technical struggle. Working through a problem by first identifying it, and then letting the problem lead the way to a solution, is an important aspect of my mental process. I observe both my emotional reactions and the psychological treatments to the struggles and it becomes an indication for the next action in my process. Without going through the stages of struggle, the work cannot be “finished” and I cannot sense the completion of the work.

Struggle provides a need for deconstruction. Most think of struggle as a negative thing, but it may signify incredible opportunities for growth. In my journey at Herron's MFA program, my work went through a transformation. When the limited usage of the mediums exhausted the important elements of unpredictability and uncontrollability, I faced limitations. My actions and the interaction with the materials began to repeat themselves and the visual images became stagnant. I have no objection to painting, but I realize that abstract painting by itself no longer is able to provide solutions to resolve my problems. The reactions and interactions of paint have become predictable, which contradicts the "fortuitous" concept that's the primary element for all my work. The idea of eliminating color schemes automatically came first to serve the deconstruction purpose and helped me distill and redefine my process. I discovered that many elements of my creating process stayed similar and so did the results in the composition. I initiated the attempts to experiment with various different materials including paper, wood, resin, etc. My decision to involve new materials was deliberately made in order to promote changes into the interaction between the materials and myself to produce unfamiliar responses. In one of the first experiments, I attached torn canvas pieces onto the canvas, and the collage-like characteristic was the first of the sculptural quality appearing in my two-dimensional work. I also experimented using various motions with paint-dipped objects towards the canvas with the intention of creating new marks. Cutting through canvas was a very significant step, through which I began engaging the real space, and from there I opened up to the idea of treating the canvas as an object, as well as realizing layers in a three-dimensional way with



different materials. The significance of this step was not the emphasis of the opposition of flatness and space. It was to acknowledge the new form with the understanding of the difference between image and object-ness. The work maintained the traditional sense of painting in which the characteristics of paint still served as connections for all other materials I used. Meanwhile, there were more complex forms that were contributed by the sculptural quality from other materials.

The practice of my process contains the same elements regardless of the different materials. The choice for new materials is not intentional, and many materials come from the objects that are in my surrounding. Working with new materials has brought back the challenges and the unexpected, uncontrollable factors that are essential in my process. I furthered my experiments and incorporated many new components that emerged from experimenting with different approaches and new materials. The original material remained as well; for example, throughout these experiments I repurposed canvas and learned to manipulate it with different approaches. I built on top of stretched canvas with resin layers or placed canvas strips and threads over one another. These actions challenged me to extend my perspectives in the compositions from two-dimensional to three-dimensional spaces. It also gave emphasis to the layers, which was one of the most important elements in my work. Resin became relevant and one of the specific materials that initiated new aspects in the visual outcomes. It required precise measurement and mixture technique for the chemical reaction that induced the curing. Resin was capable of preserving the layers in a more dramatic way. The transparent quality

disclosed the history of the process through showing the markings on the previous layers. There was also a force of change in the aspect of time due to the curing process. When infusing paint into resin, the uncontrollability prompted the unpredictable outcomes, and this interaction of materials delivered the transformation of the visual imagery.

### **A new composition**

I have arrived to a new place. Materials that form the object bridge a renewed investigation into how my process is shaped. The new freedom enables my vision to expand into a different dimension. There is no longer the need to compose; I let the composition reveal itself. Instead of making a painting that is an interpretation of an experience, I discover an object that reveals experience, an experience that can be shared by both the audience and myself.

The form of my painting becomes the content. It's an attempt to exceed the limitation of the flat surface of painting, which historically has always been the illusion or window into an imaginary world, but the intention never includes rejecting painting. The content on the front of the canvas is still relevant. As the canvas seems to be floating or frozen within the solid transparent substance, it is also the window through which we glance the moments of our memory or emotion. Formally, the elements we consider in painting such as color and form are re-conformed into a new composition in these pieces. Conceptually, my work has been deconstructed and redefined through examining the oppositional meanings. The

coexistence of painting/sculpture, illusion/reality, and image/space in the work is the reflection of Tao's Ying and Yang, the oppositional elements that complement each other and as part of a process of harmonization ensuring a constant balance of all things. As in deconstruction, a new composition is created not by intending to synthesize the concepts in opposition, but to mark their difference and understand their eternal interplay.

### **Final thoughts**

My working process practices observation and ritual to engineer an existence that reflects on my reality. All forms of realities are present: intuitive expressions, meditation in movements, problem identifying, observing for the happenings, conscious decision-making, problem solving, and the drive to reach a balanced state. All these realities are the reflections of life experiences and the struggles encountered that we share as human beings. My work seeks to embrace the Taoist thoughts and understand the struggle that is inevitable in this emerging multicultural world. I consciously anticipate the physical and psychological struggle and seek to reveal the traces and history of the struggle between the materials and myself. I do not just anticipate completing the final composition, but also understanding the meaning of the experiences.

Throughout the time, regardless of the media and materials I opt to utilize, there is a consistency with the underlying "rectangle"-window or canvas- as the foundation. Efforts are made to omit its existence, but it has never been successful. In the

semiotic sense, the rectangle represents the system and the cultural background that is the structure which I depend on in order to operate; at the same time it is the restriction and the frame that I resist and intend to break through in order to seek growth.

The act of imitating and realizing realities in the creating process becomes the intention for communication. I strive to focus on the expressions of the dealings within myself being immersed in two different cultures, feeling fulfilled yet sometimes disconnected and always in search of a balanced state of mind. My work gives meanings and provides the path for me to embody all these thoughts. The connection that strikes the reflections of human sentiments in reality is the core meaning that sustains my work. It is my understanding that the viewers who have encountered different life experiences would narrate the imagery into their own unique interpretation. My intention is to anchor my small existence to a bigger one, for the essence of our existence is our experience, and we are all part of each other in this world we live in.

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Detail from *A Distilled Opposition* 2016  
Mixed Media  
Dimensions vary



Detail from *A Distilled Opposition* 2016  
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Dimensions vary



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